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The Future of Media Diplomacy: A Meta-Analytical Study of Formal and Informal Actors, Emerging Trends, Themes, and Strategic Implications

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ABSTRACT

Media diplomacy is undergoing a structural transformation driven by digitalization, social media, platformization, accelerated information circulation, and the growing participation of non-state actors in international communication. This study examines the future of media diplomacy by focusing on the changing roles and relationships of formal and informal actors and by identifying the dominant trends, themes, and strategic implications emerging from the relevant literature. Using a qualitative meta-synthesis design, the study integrates systematic literature review, thematic analysis, and foresight-oriented interpretation. The analytical process involved identifying recurrent concepts, clustering them into higher-order categories, and interpreting the resulting themes as indicators of broader structural trends and future developments. The findings reveal eight interconnected transformations: the shift from state-centered to networked media diplomacy; the redefinition of formal actors from exclusive message producers to strategic narrative managers; the growing influence of informal actors; the centrality of narrative competition; the increasing strategic importance of speed, transparency, and trust; the evolution of soft power toward perception management; the reconfiguration of formal–informal actor relations; and the growing necessity of foresight-based communication governance. The results indicate that future media diplomacy will not be dominated exclusively by either governmental institutions or informal networks. Instead, its effectiveness will depend on the capacity to combine institutional legitimacy with communicative agility, social credibility, technological adaptability, and strategic narrative competence. The study proposes a networked framework in which technological and societal drivers influence actor configurations, communicative processes, and strategic outcomes such as soft power, legitimacy, trust, international image, and foreign-policy effectiveness. It concludes that successful media diplomacy will increasingly require anticipatory governance, continuous monitoring of emerging technologies and actors, rapid yet credible communication, and intelligent coordination between formal authority and informal influence within an increasingly fragmented and competitive global media environment. This framework offers practical guidance for policymakers designing resilient, adaptive, and audience-centered diplomatic communication strategies.

Keywords: Media Diplomacy; Digital Diplomacy; Foresight; Formal Actors; Informal Actors; Strategic Narratives; Soft Power; Perception Management



Introduction

The transformation of the contemporary communication environment has altered both the practice of diplomacy and the distribution of communicative power within international politics. Diplomacy was traditionally conducted through institutionalized channels in which governments, ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, official spokespersons, and state-affiliated media exercised substantial control over the formulation and dissemination of political messages. In that model, media primarily functioned as an instrument through which diplomatic positions could be communicated to domestic and international audiences. The expansion of digital communication, however, has progressively disrupted this hierarchical arrangement. Media diplomacy has become embedded in an environment characterized by immediacy, interactivity, transnational information flows, continuous audience participation, and competition among heterogeneous actors for public attention. Historical analyses of digital public diplomacy indicate that technological change has repeatedly transformed the relationship between diplomatic institutions, communication technologies, and foreign publics, while contemporary digital disruption has greatly accelerated this transformation (1). The increasingly central role of networked communication has therefore made it difficult to understand diplomacy solely through formal diplomatic institutions. Digital diplomacy now encompasses forms of public engagement that exceed the conventional transmission of governmental information and increasingly involve direct, interactive, and decentralized communication with diverse publics (2).

This transformation is particularly evident in the expansion of social media as an arena of diplomatic activity. Platforms that were initially perceived as supplementary communication tools have become important spaces in which governments, political leaders, journalists, advocacy groups, influencers, and ordinary users participate in framing international events. Research on digital diplomacy has demonstrated that social media networks enable foreign-policy actors to communicate directly with audiences while simultaneously exposing official communication to immediate response, reinterpretation, contestation, and redistribution (3). Twitter and comparable platforms have contributed to a restructuring of international media communication by reducing the distance between diplomatic institutions and public audiences and allowing diplomatic messages to circulate within highly dynamic information environments (4). The result is not merely a technological modernization of diplomacy. Rather, a more fundamental change has occurred in the architecture of communication, because the capacity to construct politically consequential narratives is no longer monopolized by actors possessing formal diplomatic authority.

Media diplomacy should consequently be understood as a field of interaction in which media simultaneously serve as instruments, environments, and actors. Earlier conceptions often emphasized the capacity of governments to use media to communicate foreign-policy priorities and strengthen national interests. Iranian scholarship similarly emphasized media diplomacy as a strategic means of advancing foreign-policy objectives and shaping international perceptions (5). Other studies highlighted the relationship between media diplomacy and the broader development of public diplomacy, arguing that contemporary diplomatic influence increasingly depends on the ability to communicate persuasively with foreign publics rather than exclusively with other governments (6). Yet the contemporary media environment has complicated this conventional model because diplomatic messages now circulate through networks in which institutional authority competes with social credibility, algorithmic visibility, emotional resonance, communicative speed, and audience participation. Media diplomacy has therefore become an arena in which political influence depends not only on the possession of information or institutional authority but

also on the capacity to define events, construct compelling narratives, generate trust, and mobilize networked publics.

The distinction between formal and informal actors provides a useful analytical lens for understanding these changes. Formal actors include governments, foreign ministries, diplomatic missions, state institutions, official media organizations, and other entities that possess recognized institutional authority in the conduct or communication of foreign policy. Their principal advantages derive from legal legitimacy, access to authoritative information, proximity to decision-making structures, and the capacity to articulate official positions. The traditional interaction between diplomatic institutions and media organizations has nevertheless involved persistent challenges arising from differences between bureaucratic procedures and media requirements (7). Formal institutions typically operate under conditions of organizational accountability, political sensitivity, and procedural authorization, whereas digital media environments reward speed, accessibility, emotional immediacy, and continuous engagement. This institutional asymmetry has become increasingly consequential as the news cycle has accelerated and audiences have acquired access to multiple competing interpretations before formal institutions are able to complete conventional communication processes.

Informal actors occupy a different but increasingly influential position. They include independent journalists, analysts, civil-society organizations, intellectuals, celebrities, social-media influencers, digital activists, transnational communities, and highly connected ordinary users. Although they do not necessarily possess institutional authority, they may exercise substantial communicative influence through their capacity to generate attention, cultivate audience relationships, translate complex political developments into accessible language, and respond rapidly to emerging events. Social networks have expanded the ability of such actors to participate in media diplomacy by weakening traditional gatekeeping structures and facilitating the rapid dissemination of alternative interpretations (8). The importance of unconventional actors is also demonstrated by emerging forms of digital public diplomacy in which political figures use highly personalized and culturally resonant social-media content to generate engagement and relatability (9). These developments illustrate that contemporary diplomatic influence can operate through communicative forms that are very different from traditional official statements.

The resulting relationship between formal and informal actors cannot adequately be characterized as a simple opposition between state and non-state communication. In many contexts, informal actors reinforce official narratives, translate them into socially accessible forms, extend their circulation, or provide credibility among audiences skeptical of institutional communication. In other situations, informal actors contest governmental narratives, expose contradictions, produce alternative frames, or mobilize public opposition. The same actor may even perform complementary and adversarial roles at different moments. Contemporary media diplomacy therefore involves a fluid spectrum of cooperation, competition, substitution, amplification, and mutual adaptation. Research on the re-emergence of media diplomacy in contexts such as Kosovo demonstrates that media actors and diplomatic actors can assume overlapping roles in political communication and international representation (10). Similarly, studies of regional conflict resolution show that electronic journalism can become actively implicated in diplomatic processes rather than functioning merely as an external observer (11). These findings reinforce the need to treat media diplomacy as a multi-actor system.

The transformation of actors is accompanied by an equally important transformation in the nature of influence. Contemporary media diplomacy is increasingly organized around competition over narratives rather than merely competition over the transmission of factual information. Strategic narratives provide interpretive frameworks

through which events, actors, responsibilities, threats, opportunities, and political identities are understood. Studies of European public diplomacy during repeated crises demonstrate that the effectiveness of public communication depends significantly on the capacity of political institutions to maintain coherent narratives across changing situations (12). This narrative dimension is especially important in an environment in which users are continuously exposed to competing frames from governments, journalists, organizations, influencers, and transnational media. The central question is no longer solely whether a diplomatic message reaches an audience, but whether it becomes credible, emotionally intelligible, socially reproducible, and sufficiently persuasive to structure public interpretation.

Audience engagement has accordingly become a key measure of digital diplomatic effectiveness. Research examining audience engagement in digital diplomacy demonstrates that visibility alone does not adequately represent communicative impact and that patterns of audience interaction provide important evidence about whether diplomatic content is actually being received and processed by publics (13). At the same time, digital audiences do not passively accept all content to which they are exposed. The diversity of digital media exposure and the capacity of users to verify information can influence subsequent attitudes and behavioral intentions (14). These dynamics make credibility, transparency, verification, and trust strategic variables within media diplomacy. Formal authority may provide one source of credibility, but it cannot guarantee acceptance, particularly where institutional communication conflicts sharply with users' existing experiences or with narratives circulating through trusted social networks.

These changes have especially important consequences during crises. Crisis conditions compress decision-making time, increase public uncertainty, intensify competition for information, and magnify the consequences of communicative delay. Digital diplomacy in the social-media era therefore presents both substantial opportunities and serious challenges for crisis communication (15). Iranian experience during the COVID-19 crisis similarly demonstrated the strategic relevance of media diplomacy for advancing national interests and managing public communication under exceptional conditions (16). In such environments, the first persuasive interpretation of an event may acquire significant agenda-setting power. Formal institutions therefore confront the difficult task of preserving accuracy and institutional accountability while operating within communication environments that reward immediate reaction. Informal actors, by contrast, may respond more rapidly but may lack access to verified information or institutional responsibility. The interaction between these different capabilities becomes a decisive component of media-diplomatic effectiveness.

The importance of these developments extends directly to soft power. Media diplomacy has long been associated with efforts to win the attention, confidence, and support of foreign publics through persuasion rather than coercion. Media have consequently been described as particularly important instruments for influencing the hearts and minds of nations (17). In contemporary digital environments, however, soft power increasingly depends on the management of perception across fragmented communication networks. A country's image is no longer constructed primarily by its official broadcasts or diplomatic statements. It emerges through the interaction of official messages, journalistic interpretations, social-media discussions, user-generated content, cultural representations, algorithmically curated information, and transnational commentary. A cognitive approach to media diplomacy therefore places increased emphasis on the mechanisms through which information is perceived, interpreted, retained, and integrated into public understanding (18). The future of soft power will consequently depend on the

ability of diplomatic systems to understand the cognitive and networked processes through which public meaning is formed.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on media diplomacy, digital diplomacy, social networks, strategic narratives, and public engagement, several analytical limitations remain. Earlier studies frequently privilege formal diplomatic actors, while newer studies sometimes focus on digital platforms without adequately integrating institutional and non-institutional actors into a common framework. Research also tends to analyze existing practices rather than systematically considering the future implications of technological acceleration, fragmented authority, changing audience behavior, and increasing narrative competition. The available literature therefore contains substantial knowledge about particular dimensions of media diplomacy but less integrative understanding of how these dimensions jointly shape its future trajectory. The present study addresses this gap by synthesizing existing research around the evolving relationship between formal and informal actors and by interpreting recurrent themes as indicators of structural trends and future strategic requirements.

The objective of this study is to identify the principal trends transforming media diplomacy, explain the changing roles and relationships of formal and informal actors, synthesize the dominant themes emerging from existing scholarship, and derive strategic implications for the future development of the field. The study asks how media diplomacy is likely to evolve as communicative power becomes increasingly distributed between institutional and networked actors and as new media technologies alter the conditions under which diplomatic narratives are produced, circulated, contested, and accepted. Rather than treating the future as a simple continuation of present conditions, the analysis approaches it as an evolving field shaped by interacting drivers, institutional adaptations, technological uncertainties, and alternative configurations of communicative power. In doing so, the study seeks to move beyond a binary distinction between official and unofficial communication and toward a networked understanding of media diplomacy in which legitimacy, speed, trust, narrative capacity, and relational coordination jointly determine influence.

Theoretical Background and Literature Synthesis

The theoretical foundations of contemporary media diplomacy lie at the intersection of international relations, communication studies, public diplomacy, media studies, soft-power theory, strategic communication, and digital politics. The concept developed from recognition that diplomacy is not conducted exclusively through confidential negotiations or formal intergovernmental channels but also through public communication capable of shaping international perceptions. Media diplomacy originally emphasized the instrumental use of mass media by political and diplomatic institutions. In this framework, media were treated primarily as channels through which states explained policies, communicated national positions, defended international interests, and attempted to influence foreign publics. Early scholarship in the Iranian context described media diplomacy in terms of the opportunities and challenges associated with integrating media capacities into foreign-policy communication (5). Discussions of media-diplomatic institutional relations also emphasized that media organizations and diplomatic institutions operate according to different professional logics, creating both opportunities for cooperation and recurrent organizational tensions (7). These approaches remain useful, but they cannot fully account for the redistribution of communication capacities generated by digital networks.

The rise of new public diplomacy broadened the theoretical understanding of diplomatic communication by shifting attention from one-way governmental messaging toward interaction with societies and publics. This

development weakened the analytical assumption that diplomacy takes place exclusively between official representatives. New public diplomacy recognizes that national influence can be generated through cultural interaction, social exchange, communication networks, educational relationships, media visibility, and public participation. Media diplomacy became increasingly connected to this broader logic of public diplomacy because mass communication could contribute to the generation of political attractiveness and soft power (6). Digital transformation extended this shift further by allowing diplomatic institutions to communicate with audiences without relying exclusively on established mass-media intermediaries. Practical examinations of digital diplomacy in the Western Balkans illustrate how governments and diplomatic institutions began incorporating digital technologies into foreign-policy practices while adapting to new patterns of political communication (19). Digital diplomacy therefore represents both a technological extension of public diplomacy and a broader transformation in the relationship between diplomacy and the public sphere.

The networked structure of digital communication changes the conventional distinction between sender, medium, and receiver. In a traditional broadcasting environment, diplomatic institutions could formulate a message, transmit it through selected media channels, and expect a relatively stable distinction between message producers and audiences. Social media have destabilized this structure because recipients can immediately become interpreters, critics, distributors, and producers of competing content. Digital public diplomacy consequently involves forms of engagement that differ qualitatively from internet-based dissemination of conventional public-relations materials (2). Research on contemporary social-media diplomacy similarly demonstrates that digital platforms support innovative foreign-policy practices by creating spaces for direct communication, interaction, and network formation (3). The theoretical significance of this change is considerable: communicative power becomes relational rather than exclusively institutional because the impact of a diplomatic message depends partly on how networked actors receive, reinterpret, and redistribute it.

This networked structure produces a distinction between formal authority and communicative authority. Formal actors derive authority from institutional status. Governments, ministries, embassies, and official media organizations are recognized as legitimate sources of national policy positions. Their statements may possess diplomatic and legal significance that informal communication cannot reproduce. Yet formal authority does not automatically create audience trust or persuasive effectiveness. The bureaucratic character of diplomatic institutions can generate communicative disadvantages, particularly where authorization procedures delay responses or where official discourse appears distant from ordinary audience concerns. Strategies proposed for strengthening Iranian media diplomacy have therefore emphasized the importance of institutional adaptation, communication capacity, and greater responsiveness to changing cultural and media environments (20). The broader theoretical implication is that contemporary formal actors must combine institutional legitimacy with communicative competence.

Informal actors operate through different sources of influence. Their authority is frequently relational, reputational, cultural, or network-based rather than legal. Independent journalists may acquire credibility through professional expertise; activists may derive authority from social identification; influencers may possess exceptionally strong parasocial relationships with audiences; analysts may build reputations through specialist knowledge; and ordinary users may become temporarily influential through viral content. Digital platforms allow these actors to contribute to the interpretation of international affairs without being formally incorporated into diplomatic institutions. Research on politicians' use of personalized social-media content, including unconventional strategies such as animal-

centered posts, shows how even formal political actors increasingly adopt informal communicative styles to create familiarity and engagement (9). This suggests that the formal–informal distinction is not simply a classification of institutional identity. It also describes competing modes of communication and legitimacy that can overlap within the behavior of the same actor.

The fluidity of this distinction is particularly visible in media organizations. News media may be independent of government while still participating in international image formation and political legitimation. Studies of local news framing demonstrate that media framing can shape the legitimacy assigned to organizations and sociopolitical activities within host-country environments (21). In regional conflict settings, electronic journalism may play an active diplomatic role by contributing to conflict representation, communication among publics, and interpretations of political actors (11). These examples support a broader theoretical conception of media as participants in diplomatic processes rather than passive transmitters of government messages. Media institutions select, emphasize, contextualize, and narrativize information, thereby influencing the meanings through which foreign-policy events are publicly understood.

Strategic narrative theory provides a particularly useful framework for analyzing this process. Narratives organize complex events into intelligible sequences and assign meaning to actors, causes, responsibilities, threats, and desired outcomes. In diplomacy, strategic narratives can help governments explain their international behavior, present preferred identities, justify policies, and define political crises. Yet such narratives exist within competitive communication systems. Analysis of the European Union's strategic narratives across multiple crises demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining coherent public diplomacy during conditions of persistent instability (12). In a highly networked environment, strategic narratives must compete not only with narratives produced by rival governments but also with interpretations generated by journalists, opposition groups, digital communities, influencers, activists, and transnational publics. Narrative effectiveness thus depends on coherence and credibility but also on circulation, adaptability, timing, and audience resonance.

The growing importance of narrative competition transforms the meaning of soft power. Conventional soft-power approaches emphasize attraction, legitimacy, cultural appeal, and the ability to shape preferences without coercion. Media diplomacy operationalizes these capacities by presenting values, identities, political positions, and national images to external publics. The concept of media diplomacy as a means of winning the minds and hearts of international audiences reflects this persuasive understanding (17). However, contemporary digital communication requires a more dynamic conception because audiences are exposed to simultaneous and contradictory efforts at persuasion. Soft power increasingly depends on the ability to shape interpretive environments rather than merely project favorable images. Cognitive approaches to media diplomacy are therefore significant because they focus attention on how narratives influence perception, judgment, and meaning construction (18). From this perspective, effective media diplomacy requires understanding not just what information is communicated but how audiences cognitively process competing representations of political reality.

Trust becomes central within this theoretical configuration. In conventional institutional communication, credibility was often linked to recognized authority. Digital media environments have created more complex credibility systems. Users may distrust official sources while placing substantial confidence in independent analysts, peer networks, or socially familiar personalities. Conversely, rapid informal communication can circulate inaccurate or unverified information, making institutional verification particularly important. Research examining information verification in diverse digital media environments shows that audiences' interaction with multiple information sources

can influence attitudes and decision-making processes (14). The implications for media diplomacy are profound because effective communication must increasingly reconcile two competing demands: speed and verification. Actors who respond too slowly risk losing narrative initiative, while actors who respond rapidly without adequate verification may sacrifice credibility.

Audience engagement therefore constitutes another key theoretical dimension. Digital diplomacy is not adequately assessed through the quantity of messages disseminated because communication effectiveness depends on reception, interaction, and relational involvement. Audience engagement research has sought to operationalize digital diplomatic effectiveness through indicators of audience interaction rather than simple institutional presence online (13). This orientation marks an important shift from communication output toward communication effects. It also highlights the growing agency of audiences. Engagement patterns reveal which messages attract attention, provoke discussion, generate endorsement, or encourage redistribution. At the same time, platform metrics can incentivize sensationalism, emotionalization, and personalization, creating tension between institutional diplomatic norms and the attention economy of digital media.

Social-media platforms themselves must therefore be conceptualized as structural actors in media diplomacy. Although platforms do not necessarily formulate national diplomatic objectives, their algorithms determine visibility, recommendation, amplification, and the organization of attention. The impact of Twitter on digital diplomacy illustrates how platform architecture can influence the tempo and form of international communication (4). Communication on such platforms is compressed, immediate, highly public, and susceptible to rapid recirculation. These characteristics encourage diplomatic actors to simplify messages, personalize communication, react rapidly, and participate in real-time narrative contests. At the same time, platforms make official communication vulnerable to context collapse, parody, hostile reinterpretation, misinformation, and coordinated counter-narratives.

These characteristics become particularly visible during crises, where diplomatic communication is subject to intense temporal pressure. Contemporary scholarship describes digital diplomacy as operating within an environment of accelerated crisis communication in which social media create both opportunities for rapid outreach and challenges related to misinformation, information overload, and contested narratives (15). The experience of media diplomacy during COVID-19 similarly demonstrated that crisis conditions can elevate communication from a supporting governmental function to a central component of national-interest protection (16). Perpetual crisis conditions may therefore become a defining feature of future media diplomacy, particularly as geopolitical conflicts, public-health emergencies, migration crises, environmental disasters, economic disruptions, and technological controversies unfold simultaneously within global communication systems.

A foresight perspective extends these theoretical insights by examining how identified structural changes may interact over time. Foresight does not assume that current trends will continue linearly. Instead, it directs attention toward drivers, emerging issues, uncertainties, alternative pathways, and the capacity of institutions to prepare for change. Historical analysis demonstrates that media disruption has repeatedly transformed diplomatic communication rather than producing a single stable digital endpoint (1). The contemporary environment should therefore be viewed as another transitional stage rather than the final form of diplomacy. Artificial intelligence, synthetic media, automated content production, algorithmic personalization, changing platform governance, increasingly sophisticated disinformation, and further fragmentation of audiences are likely to alter the balance between formal and informal actors. Theoretically, the future of media diplomacy can thus be understood as the

interaction among technological drivers, actor configurations, narrative mechanisms, audience behavior, and strategic outcomes. This integrated perspective provides the conceptual basis for the present synthesis.

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative, documentary, and interpretive research design based on systematic literature review, qualitative meta-synthesis, thematic analysis, and foresight-oriented interpretation. The design was selected because the research problem concerns a multidimensional transformation that cannot be adequately represented through the statistical aggregation of a single standardized outcome. The available scholarship on media diplomacy includes conceptual analyses, case studies, communication studies, studies of social-media practices, institutional assessments, public-diplomacy research, crisis-communication analyses, and investigations of particular countries or platforms. Accordingly, the purpose of synthesis was not to calculate a pooled effect size but to identify recurrent conceptual patterns across heterogeneous studies and use those patterns to explain structural trends in the changing relationship between formal and informal actors. The methodological logic was therefore closer to qualitative meta-synthesis than to conventional quantitative meta-analysis.

The study treated previously published research as a body of secondary qualitative evidence. This orientation is compatible with the diversity of the media-diplomacy literature, where important findings frequently appear as theoretical claims, case-specific observations, descriptions of communication practices, classifications of actors, assessments of institutional adaptation, and analyses of digital engagement. For example, scholarship on social-media diplomacy has documented innovation in foreign-policy communication (3), while other research has examined digital diplomacy through specific regional practices (19). Studies concerned with audience engagement contribute a different level of evidence by focusing on measurable interaction between diplomatic accounts and users (13). Rather than treating such methodological diversity as a reason to exclude non-comparable studies, the qualitative synthesis was designed to identify recurring higher-order concepts across them.

The search framework was organized around the substantive dimensions of the research question. Search concepts included media diplomacy, digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, social media and diplomacy, strategic narratives, media and foreign policy, soft power, formal diplomatic actors, non-state and informal actors, audience engagement, digital communication, crisis communication, and future-oriented transformations in media environments. Related terms were used in combination to identify research directly addressing media diplomacy as well as studies contributing theoretically relevant insights about changing communication structures. The literature base included both foundational studies that clarified the relationship between media and diplomatic institutions and more recent research focusing on digital diplomacy, social-media engagement, networked public communication, strategic narratives, and technological disruption. This broad conceptual coverage was necessary because the concept of media diplomacy overlaps with adjacent fields and is not consistently labeled across the literature.

The inclusion process prioritized sources that contributed meaningful evidence to at least one dimension of the analytical framework. Studies were considered relevant where they addressed the use of media in foreign policy, public or digital diplomacy, diplomatic communication on social networks, formal diplomatic institutions, independent or non-state communicators, strategic narratives, image construction, soft power, audience engagement, crisis communication, or technological transformations affecting international communication. Sources also needed to provide sufficient conceptual or analytical content to permit thematic coding. Purely peripheral discussions in which media diplomacy appeared only incidentally were not treated as central evidence. Duplicate records, sources

lacking sufficient analytical information, and material without a meaningful connection to the research question were excluded from the interpretive corpus. The purpose of these criteria was not to impose artificial methodological uniformity but to preserve analytical relevance.

The review process proceeded through successive stages of identification, screening, analytical selection, and synthesis. Initially retrieved studies were examined for substantive relevance through titles, abstracts, keywords, and where necessary full texts. Studies surviving this stage were then read with attention to their principal arguments, methodological orientation, conceptual categories, observations regarding actors, and implications for the changing media environment. This process allowed the research corpus to be organized not according to publication chronology alone but according to the analytical problems repeatedly addressed across studies. Earlier research, for instance, frequently emphasized the institutional relationship between media and diplomacy (7), whereas more recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the consequences of networked digital engagement (2). Such shifts were treated as evidence of broader transformations in the scholarly understanding of media diplomacy.

Data extraction was conceptually oriented. Relevant passages and findings were coded according to the phenomenon they described rather than according to predetermined assumptions about which actors were more influential. Initial codes included state-centered communication, institutional legitimacy, bureaucratic delay, social-media interaction, audience engagement, non-state participation, narrative competition, trust, credibility, speed, crisis response, image construction, cognitive influence, soft power, network diffusion, technological disruption, and future uncertainty. The use of open conceptual coding was important because it allowed patterns to emerge across studies that differed considerably in geographical setting and research design. For instance, analyses of diplomatic Twitter communication (22) could be compared conceptually with studies of digital diplomacy in national foreign-policy contexts (23) even though the empirical units were not identical.

The second stage of analysis involved clustering related codes into broader conceptual categories. Codes concerning rapid response, real-time interaction, shortened news cycles, and crisis communication were combined within a category representing the changing temporal logic of media diplomacy. Codes relating to institutional authority, official information, state legitimacy, and policymaking access were organized around the resources of formal actors. Codes concerning flexibility, social proximity, network penetration, influencer communication, and independent interpretation were grouped around the increasing capacity of informal actors. Similarly, framing, narrative construction, image management, strategic communication, and meaning competition were grouped around the concept of narrative power. The purpose of this stage was to move from isolated observations toward relational categories capable of explaining how different features of contemporary media diplomacy operate together.

The third analytical stage generated higher-order themes. A theme was retained when it represented a recurrent and conceptually significant pattern across multiple strands of the literature and when it contributed directly to explaining the transformation of media diplomacy. The resulting synthesis identified a transition from state-centered to networked media diplomacy, the changing role of formal actors, the increasing influence of informal actors, the centrality of narrative competition, the strategic significance of speed and credibility, the development of soft power toward perception management, the reconfiguration of formal–informal relations, and the growing necessity of foresight-oriented governance. These themes were not treated as completely independent phenomena. Instead, the analysis examined causal and reciprocal relationships among them. For example, the growing influence of

informal actors was interpreted partly as a consequence of digital-network structures, while intensified narrative competition was interpreted as a consequence of both actor proliferation and reduced institutional control over message circulation.

The interpretation of formal and informal actors required particular conceptual caution. Formal actors were defined primarily through institutional location and recognized authority in the conduct or communication of state policy. Informal actors were defined as actors lacking such formal diplomatic authority but capable of shaping politically relevant narratives and public perceptions. However, the analysis did not assume that this distinction is absolute. Digital environments encourage formal actors to adopt personalized and informal communication practices, while non-state actors may cooperate with governments or become embedded in state-supported communication networks. Personalized forms of digital public diplomacy illustrate precisely this overlap between formal political status and informalized communicative performance (9). Accordingly, formal and informal were treated as analytical categories describing predominant institutional positions rather than rigidly separated social worlds.

Cross-study comparison was used to strengthen interpretive validity. Similar findings appearing in different political and geographical settings were examined for their underlying conceptual commonality. Research on European strategic narratives in recurrent crises, for example, highlighted problems of narrative coherence (12), while research on media diplomacy and national interests under crisis conditions emphasized the operational importance of communication capacity (16). Although these studies addressed different contexts, both contributed evidence concerning the strategic consequences of communication under conditions of uncertainty. Likewise, research on audience engagement (13) and information verification (14) informed the broader theme of credibility and audience agency. The synthesis therefore relied on conceptual convergence rather than assuming direct empirical equivalence among studies.

The final analytical stage was explicitly future-oriented. Themes emerging from the literature were interpreted as indicators of broader trends and drivers rather than merely descriptions of present practices. This stage distinguished between observed changes and their potential implications. The increased use of social networks, for example, was not interpreted simply as greater technological adoption. It was treated as a driver of decentralized participation, accelerated narrative circulation, direct audience interaction, and greater competition between institutional and non-institutional actors. Historical work on digital public diplomacy supports the assumption that changing media technologies can have structural rather than merely instrumental effects on diplomatic practice (1). Similarly, contemporary evidence concerning the integration of digital technologies into international relations indicates that digital transformation increasingly affects broader foreign-policy practices rather than isolated communication activities (23).

Foresight interpretation focused on three analytical levels: emerging direction, strategic uncertainty, and institutional implication. Emerging directions were identified where several themes pointed toward continuing structural change, such as the proliferation of actors or greater dependence on networked communication. Strategic uncertainties were identified where future outcomes could plausibly diverge, particularly regarding whether formal and informal actors would develop complementary, competitive, or conflictual relationships. Institutional implications were derived by asking what capabilities would be necessary under multiple plausible futures rather than only under a single predicted scenario. This logic was used to distinguish future-oriented analysis from conventional trend

extrapolation. The study therefore does not claim deterministic prediction. Instead, it identifies patterns sufficiently recurrent to support reasoned consideration of possible, probable, and desirable developments.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through transparency in the relationship between codes, themes, and interpretive conclusions. Findings were formulated around recurring patterns rather than isolated claims, and theoretically distinct issues were maintained where necessary. For example, audience engagement and narrative credibility were treated as related but not interchangeable concepts. Similarly, the increased role of informal actors was not automatically interpreted as declining relevance of states. Evidence concerning persistent institutional functions in media diplomacy required the synthesis to retain formal actors as central components of the emerging networked system. The method was consequently designed to avoid binary conclusions and instead identify how different forms of communicative authority are being recombined.

Several methodological limitations remain inherent in this design. The evidence base is heterogeneous in conceptual terminology, geographical scope, research method, and level of analysis. Qualitative meta-synthesis cannot establish statistical causal effects regarding the relative influence of formal and informal actors. Rapid technological change also means that some observed communication practices may evolve quickly as platforms, algorithms, user habits, and technological capabilities change. Moreover, the boundary between media diplomacy, public diplomacy, digital diplomacy, strategic communication, and political communication remains conceptually porous. These limitations were addressed by maintaining a focus on higher-order structural patterns rather than making narrow quantitative claims. The resulting methodology is therefore most appropriate for identifying relational trends, synthesizing dispersed knowledge, and constructing a strategic foresight framework for understanding the future of media diplomacy.

Findings, Discussion, and Strategic Foresight

The synthesis indicates that the most fundamental transformation in media diplomacy is the transition from a predominantly state-centered and hierarchical model toward a networked and multi-actor configuration. In the traditional model, states exercised substantial control over diplomatic communication because they possessed the institutional authority, communication infrastructure, and access to information necessary to define official positions. Contemporary digital environments have not eliminated these resources, but they have reduced the ability of states to control the broader circulation and interpretation of political meaning. Social-media diplomacy enables messages to be directly redistributed, reframed, challenged, and supplemented by interconnected publics (3). The growth of digital public engagement also means that diplomacy increasingly consists of interaction rather than merely the online publication of government information (2). Consequently, media diplomacy is becoming less hierarchical because communicative effects are generated through networks containing actors with radically different forms of institutional and social power.

This transition does not imply that formal actors are disappearing. Instead, the synthesis suggests that their role is being redefined. Governments and diplomatic institutions remain uniquely positioned to issue authoritative national positions, negotiate internationally, access classified or verified information, and connect communication with policy decisions. Yet these traditional advantages are increasingly insufficient when operating in highly accelerated communication environments. Long-standing analyses of the interaction between media and diplomatic institutions identified differences in organizational logic that could generate communication difficulties (7). Digital communication magnifies this problem because the time available for official response has contracted dramatically.

Formal institutions must therefore move from a model based on controlling the message toward one based on strategically managing narrative environments. The future formal actor is likely to remain authoritative, but its effectiveness will increasingly depend on whether it can translate authority into rapid, credible, comprehensible, and interactive communication.

The concept of the formal actor as a strategic narrative manager provides a useful interpretation of this transformation. Strategic narrative management requires more than producing official statements. It involves anticipating interpretive conflict, identifying audience concerns, coordinating messages across institutions, choosing appropriate platforms, responding before competing narratives become dominant, and maintaining consistency across prolonged crises. Research on the European Union's communication across repeated crises demonstrates the importance and difficulty of sustaining strategic narrative coherence under changing conditions (12). Formal diplomatic institutions must therefore develop narrative capabilities comparable in strategic importance to their conventional policy and negotiation capabilities. The implication is that communication can no longer be treated as the final stage of policymaking in which decisions are simply explained to the public. In networked diplomacy, communicative interpretation becomes part of the political environment in which policy itself succeeds or fails.

A second major trend is the rise of informal actors and the corresponding redistribution of communicative power. Independent media, analysts, digital activists, civil-society groups, influencers, celebrities, and networked users can now participate directly in the construction of internationally relevant political meanings. Virtual social networks have expanded the role of nontraditional actors in media diplomacy by providing low-cost infrastructures for message production and circulation (8). These actors often possess communicative advantages that differ substantially from the resources of formal institutions. They can respond quickly, use culturally familiar language, establish highly personalized relationships with audiences, experiment with formats, and communicate without lengthy institutional authorization procedures. The emergence of highly personalized forms of digital public diplomacy demonstrates how audience familiarity and informal presentation can become diplomatic resources in their own right (9).

The influence of informal actors should nevertheless not be romanticized. Their flexibility can facilitate responsiveness, but it may also produce inconsistency. Their independence may increase perceived credibility, but it can also reduce accountability. Their ability to mobilize emotion may increase public participation while simultaneously contributing to polarization. Their access to networked distribution can help correct official communication failures but can equally accelerate misinformation or fragmented interpretation. The future significance of informal actors therefore lies not in their presumed superiority but in the fact that they constitute an increasingly unavoidable layer of diplomatic communication. The state can neither fully absorb nor completely exclude this communicative field. In practice, informal actors may support national narratives in one issue area, oppose them in another, and remain ambivalent elsewhere.

The third central finding is that narrative competition has become the operational core of contemporary media diplomacy. Political actors increasingly compete to establish interpretive dominance rather than merely disseminate information. Strategic narratives determine which aspects of an event are emphasized, how responsibility is assigned, which identities are activated, and which outcomes appear legitimate. The return of media diplomacy in contemporary political contexts illustrates that media actors can become deeply involved in the construction and transmission of politically consequential narratives (10). Studies of media diplomacy in regional conflict similarly demonstrate that electronic journalism can participate in the communicative environment surrounding diplomatic

conflict resolution (11). In such situations, the important question is not simply whether information is available but which narrative becomes sufficiently compelling to define what the information means.

Narrative competition also changes how communicative effectiveness should be evaluated. Quantity of content is a poor proxy for influence because audiences encounter more information than they can process. Effective narratives require clarity, coherence, credibility, timing, emotional intelligibility, and adaptability to platform-specific forms. Digital-diplomacy research that evaluates audience engagement demonstrates the importance of examining how publics actually respond to diplomatic content rather than treating online presence itself as evidence of effectiveness (13). A narrative that is formally accurate but poorly timed or socially inaccessible may have less influence than a competing interpretation that is communicated rapidly and in familiar language. This does not make factual accuracy irrelevant; rather, it demonstrates that truth claims operate within competitive attention environments. The strategic task is therefore to combine reliability with communicative effectiveness.

This dynamic creates a fourth major trend: the elevation of speed, transparency, and trust from desirable communication qualities to strategic resources. Digital platforms have compressed the period between event, interpretation, and public judgment. During crises, actors who communicate first may shape the initial frame through which subsequent information is evaluated. Contemporary research highlights the importance of digital diplomacy in crisis communication and identifies both the opportunities of rapid engagement and the risks of the social-media environment (15). Experience during the COVID-19 crisis similarly illustrates how media diplomacy can become central to the protection and presentation of national interests during periods of intense uncertainty (16). The strategic importance of speed therefore arises not from an assumption that faster communication is always better but from the fact that delayed communication creates a narrative vacuum that other actors can fill.

Trust complicates this temporal pressure. Excessively rapid communication without verification may generate immediate attention but destroy longer-term credibility. Conversely, highly accurate institutional communication that arrives only after alternative narratives have been normalized may fail to alter public perceptions. The future of media diplomacy therefore requires what may be described as verified agility: institutional processes capable of producing sufficiently reliable communication at the speed demanded by networked media. Research on digital media exposure and information verification indicates that the ways audiences encounter and verify information influence subsequent attitudes (14). Transparency contributes to this process because audiences increasingly evaluate not only the content of claims but the openness, consistency, and responsiveness of the source. Trust consequently emerges through repeated interaction rather than formal designation alone.

The fifth major trend concerns the transformation of soft power from image projection toward perception management. Traditional media diplomacy often emphasized presenting a favorable image of a country, explaining its positions, highlighting cultural achievements, and strengthening international attractiveness. Iranian scholarship on strategies for promoting media diplomacy similarly linked communication capacity with broader cultural development and international representation (20). Yet contemporary communication environments are saturated with competing images. A state cannot determine its international image simply by increasing positive content because audiences simultaneously receive alternative representations through global news media, social platforms, diaspora communities, political opposition, entertainment media, and peer networks. Soft power increasingly depends on the ability to participate effectively in the interpretive process through which audiences decide which representation appears credible.

The cognitive dimension of media diplomacy therefore becomes increasingly important. A cognitive approach draws attention to how information is framed, processed, compared with prior beliefs, and integrated into public judgments (18). Perception management in this sense should not be reduced to manipulation. At the strategic level, it involves understanding how international publics interpret events and designing communication that is cognitively accessible, credible, and responsive to their existing frames of reference. The future complexity of this process will likely increase as algorithmic recommendation, artificial intelligence, personalization, and synthetic media influence what different groups see. Although current scholarship provides only an emerging foundation for these developments, the structural direction is clear: diplomatic communication will increasingly occur in environments where different audiences encounter different informational realities.

A sixth finding concerns the relationship between formal and informal actors. The synthesis does not support a simple replacement thesis in which informal actors progressively displace states. Formal actors retain resources that informal actors cannot fully replicate, especially legal authority, policy access, institutional continuity, diplomatic recognition, and the ability to commit states internationally. Informal actors, however, frequently possess advantages in communicative flexibility, audience proximity, and network diffusion. The strategic future therefore lies in the reconfiguration of the relationship between these capacities. Media diplomacy in regional and national contexts already illustrates the complex interaction between journalistic institutions and diplomatic processes (11). Studies of new public diplomacy likewise emphasize that influence increasingly emerges through broader public communication environments rather than exclusively through state-controlled channels (6).

Three broad configurations can be inferred from the synthesis. The first is synergistic coordination, in which institutional actors retain responsibility for official policy while informal actors expand the accessibility and social circulation of compatible narratives. Such coordination need not imply state control over independent actors. Its effectiveness may instead depend on transparency, shared issue-based interests, access to credible information, and preservation of actor autonomy. The second configuration is competitive fragmentation, in which official and informal narratives diverge sharply and each attempts to delegitimize the other. In this environment, communicative energy is consumed through internal narrative conflict, potentially weakening international credibility. The third configuration is unstable coexistence, in which relationships change according to the issue, political context, crisis, or audience. The same journalist, influencer, or civic organization may align with official communication on one national-interest question and contest it on another. This third configuration is likely to be common because networked political communication is inherently fluid.

The strategic implication is that governments require more sophisticated actor mapping. Conventional diplomatic communication often divides audiences into relatively broad national or demographic categories. Future media diplomacy must identify networks of influence, communities of trust, issue-specific opinion leaders, transnational media actors, platform-specific communicators, and rapidly emerging digital communities. Such mapping should not be designed solely to identify allies. It should help institutions understand who is shaping interpretations, why specific audiences trust particular sources, and where narrative gaps are developing. Research on Twitter-based public diplomacy demonstrates that platform communication can be examined systematically to understand how institutional actors engage publics (22). Similar analytical approaches could be extended to broader ecosystems encompassing both formal and informal actors.

A seventh major finding is that the communication environment itself is becoming a strategic domain requiring continuous institutional monitoring. Digital diplomacy is not a stable set of practices because platforms,

communication norms, user behaviors, and technologies continue to change. Historical analysis demonstrates that media disruption has repeatedly reshaped the mechanisms of global public engagement (1). Contemporary country-level studies likewise show that adoption of digital diplomacy can have wider consequences for international relations and foreign-policy practice (23). Institutions that design media strategies around a single platform or current user behavior therefore risk rapid obsolescence. Strategic capacity requires continuous horizon scanning rather than periodic modernization.

This observation leads directly to the eighth theme: the transition from reactive media diplomacy toward foresight-based communication governance. Reactive communication focuses on responding to events after they occur. Foresight-oriented governance attempts to identify emerging drivers, anticipate plausible disruptions, evaluate vulnerabilities, and prepare alternative communication strategies before crises fully develop. The growing frequency of crises and the persistence of strategic narrative competition make this capacity increasingly necessary. Scholarship describing public diplomacy in an age of recurrent or perpetual crisis illustrates why communication institutions can no longer assume long periods of stability between exceptional events (12). The media-diplomatic system must therefore be capable of simultaneous monitoring, preparation, response, and learning.

A foresight framework emerging from the synthesis can be understood through four interconnected layers. The first consists of drivers of change: digital transformation, platform evolution, accelerated information circulation, audience fragmentation, artificial intelligence, changing consumption patterns, and declining barriers to content production. The second consists of actors: official diplomatic institutions, state media, independent media, journalists, influencers, civil society, digital communities, transnational networks, and increasingly technology-mediated agents. The third consists of communicative processes: framing, narrative construction, engagement, amplification, contestation, verification, trust building, crisis response, and perception management. The fourth consists of strategic outcomes: soft power, international image, public trust, communication legitimacy, narrative coherence, policy support, and ultimately the effectiveness of foreign-policy communication. These layers operate through feedback rather than in a linear sequence.

The possible future implied by these interactions is one of continuing actor proliferation and increasing technological mediation. Under this pathway, the distinction between producers and consumers of diplomatic communication becomes even more fluid. Artificial intelligence may enable individuals and small organizations to produce highly sophisticated multilingual content at low cost, while synthetic media could make verification substantially more difficult. The probable future is characterized by persistent narrative competition in which governments remain central but must continuously compete for credibility and attention. Social-media platforms will likely remain crucial, even if the dominant platforms themselves change. The increasing relevance of engagement as a measure of digital diplomatic effectiveness already indicates movement in this direction (13). Formal institutions will therefore need to build durable capabilities rather than platform-specific communication routines.

The desirable future is neither complete state control nor uncontrolled communicative fragmentation. It is a networked but strategically coordinated environment in which institutional authority is combined with communicative agility, societal credibility, and respect for the autonomy of non-state actors. In such a system, governments would provide reliable and timely information, maintain coherent foreign-policy narratives, and build transparent relationships with socially influential actors without attempting to convert every independent communicator into an extension of official communication. Informal actors would retain their critical and autonomous roles while benefiting from more reliable access to public information. The objective would be resilience rather than message monopoly:

the ability of a national communication ecosystem to sustain credibility and coherence even when confronted by uncertainty, competition, and disagreement.

For policy and practice, this synthesis indicates that media diplomacy should be institutionally integrated into foreign-policy governance rather than treated as a subsidiary publicity function. Formal institutions require rapid-response mechanisms, interdisciplinary communication teams, continuous digital monitoring, multilingual narrative capacities, and procedures that balance authorization with speed. Strategic narrative development should occur before crises rather than after communication problems appear. Institutions also require systems for monitoring emerging actors and networks, evaluating shifts in public trust, and identifying early changes in narrative environments. The importance of social networks to media diplomacy has already made such adaptation unavoidable (8), while the demonstrated strategic relevance of media diplomacy during crises confirms that these capacities affect more than public relations (16).

The deeper strategic implication is that the future advantage in media diplomacy will derive from relational intelligence. Institutions that understand their communication networks, recognize the distinct resources possessed by formal and informal actors, detect shifts in audience trust, and adapt narratives without sacrificing credibility will be better positioned than institutions that simply expand the volume of official communication. The central contest will increasingly concern who can make political events intelligible, credible, and meaningful to networked publics. In that environment, effective media diplomacy requires institutional legitimacy, technological awareness, strategic foresight, narrative competence, and the capacity to interact constructively with actors outside formal diplomatic hierarchies. The future of media diplomacy therefore rests less on controlling communication than on understanding and intelligently governing the complex ecology through which political meaning is collectively produced.

Conclusion

The present study examined the future of media diplomacy through a qualitative synthesis of the changing roles, relationships, and communicative capacities of formal and informal actors. The analysis demonstrates that the most consequential transformation in this field is not simply the digitization of traditional diplomatic communication. It is a structural change in the organization of communicative power. Media diplomacy is moving from a predominantly hierarchical, state-centered, and one-directional model toward a networked, interactive, multi-actor, and narrative-centered configuration. Governments and diplomatic institutions remain indispensable, but they increasingly operate within communication environments that they do not independently control. Their authority now coexists with social influence generated by journalists, independent media, influencers, digital communities, civil-society actors, analysts, and other networked participants.

The findings indicate that formal actors are not becoming irrelevant. Their institutional legitimacy, policy access, continuity, authoritative information, and diplomatic recognition remain fundamental strategic resources. What is changing is the way these resources must be translated into communicative influence. Institutional status alone can no longer guarantee credibility or audience acceptance. Formal actors increasingly need rapid-response capacity, narrative competence, transparency, platform awareness, and an ability to communicate in forms that are intelligible to diverse publics. Their emerging role is consequently better understood as strategic management of a contested narrative environment than as exclusive ownership of diplomatic messages.

Informal actors have simultaneously moved from the margins of diplomatic communication toward a more central position within the media ecosystem. Their influence originates from different resources: flexibility, responsiveness,

social proximity, cultural familiarity, personalized communication, and network penetration. These characteristics allow them to enter interpretive contests rapidly and sometimes establish influential narratives before formal institutions have responded. Yet their expanding role also creates risks related to fragmentation, misinformation, emotional polarization, inconsistency, and limited accountability. Their growing importance should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that informal communication is inherently superior. Rather, it demonstrates that media-diplomatic effectiveness now depends on interactions among different forms of authority and influence.

A principal conclusion of the study is that the relationship between formal and informal actors should not be interpreted through a binary logic of control versus resistance or official communication versus unofficial communication. The relationship is fluid and context-dependent. It may involve cooperation, competition, amplification, substitution, contradiction, or temporary alignment. Formal actors possess resources that informal actors cannot easily reproduce, while informal actors possess communicative capacities that formal institutions frequently struggle to develop. The future effectiveness of media diplomacy will therefore depend substantially on how these complementary and competing capabilities are configured.

Narrative competition emerges as the central mechanism through which these relationships operate. Contemporary media diplomacy is fundamentally concerned with the construction of political meaning. Actors compete not only to communicate information but to define what events signify, which interpretations appear credible, who bears responsibility, which identities are legitimate, and which future actions are justified. Under these conditions, the effectiveness of a message depends on far more than its official status or factual content. Timing, coherence, comprehensibility, credibility, emotional resonance, platform suitability, and social reproducibility become central conditions of influence.

This transformation also changes the meaning of soft power. International image remains important, but it increasingly emerges from a complex interaction among official discourse, news interpretation, social networks, cultural representation, user-generated content, and algorithmic mediation. Soft power therefore moves closer to a broader capacity for perception management. This does not imply total control over public understanding, which is neither realistic nor desirable. It means that states and other diplomatic actors must understand how political meanings are formed within fragmented communication systems and must develop credible ways of participating in those processes.

Speed, transparency, and trust are particularly significant within this environment. Digital media have radically compressed the period between an event and its public interpretation. A communication vacuum can be filled within minutes by competing actors, and once an interpretive frame becomes established, later correction may be difficult. Formal institutions therefore require greater agility. Yet speed without reliability can be equally damaging. The strategic challenge is to develop systems capable of producing verified, coherent, and understandable communication quickly enough to participate meaningfully in real-time narrative environments.

The findings further demonstrate that future media diplomacy must be understood as a dynamic system rather than a collection of isolated communication instruments. Technological drivers alter the distribution of communicative opportunities; those opportunities change the relative capacities of actors; changing actor relationships reshape narrative processes; and these processes influence strategic outcomes such as trust, international image, legitimacy, soft power, and foreign-policy effectiveness. These outcomes then feed back into institutional strategies and public expectations. The structure is therefore cyclical and adaptive rather than linear.

From a foresight perspective, the continuation of current trends is likely to produce an environment characterized by greater actor diversity, faster narrative competition, stronger technological mediation, and increasing uncertainty regarding information authenticity and public trust. Artificial intelligence, automated content production, personalized communication, algorithmic recommendation systems, and synthetic media may intensify many of the dynamics already observable in contemporary digital diplomacy. These technologies may allow diplomatic actors to communicate more efficiently and reach audiences more precisely, but they may also lower the barriers to misinformation, impersonation, manipulation, and large-scale narrative interference. Preparedness for these developments must therefore become an integral component of media-diplomatic strategy.

The desirable future is not one in which formal institutions recover complete control over public communication. Such a model is increasingly incompatible with the structure of networked media. Nor is a desirable future one in which communication becomes entirely fragmented among uncoordinated actors. A more resilient model requires a balance between institutional authority and social dynamism. Formal actors should preserve their responsibility for reliable information, national policy positions, and strategic coordination while becoming more transparent, responsive, and communicatively adaptive. Informal actors should be recognized as genuine participants in the public communication environment rather than treated uniformly as either instruments or threats.

The practical implication is that media diplomacy must be elevated from a peripheral communication activity to a core component of strategic governance. Institutions require permanent capacities for horizon scanning, audience analysis, narrative monitoring, crisis preparation, actor mapping, technological assessment, and scenario development. These capacities should be integrated with foreign-policy planning rather than activated only after communicative crises have begun. Media diplomacy must become anticipatory rather than predominantly reactive.

The study also suggests that future research should examine the proposed relationships through empirical and comparative methods. Interviews with diplomats, media managers, journalists, influencers, and civil-society actors could clarify how different participants perceive their own roles and the boundaries between formal and informal communication. Cross-national research could reveal how political systems, media structures, cultural conditions, and levels of institutional trust influence actor relationships. Longitudinal research could examine whether the current redistribution of communicative power continues as digital technologies develop. Computational approaches could map narrative diffusion, network influence, and changes in audience engagement across platforms. Scenario-based studies could also examine how artificial intelligence, synthetic media, platform fragmentation, geopolitical crisis, and regulatory transformation might generate substantially different media-diplomatic futures.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study is based primarily on secondary literature and therefore reflects the conceptual and empirical boundaries of existing research. The included literature is heterogeneous in geographical context, methodology, terminology, and analytical focus. The qualitative synthesis identifies recurrent patterns but does not establish statistical estimates of the magnitude of actor influence. Moreover, the rapid pace of technological change means that the specific platforms and communication practices observed in current research may evolve considerably. Finally, the distinction between formal and informal actors is analytically useful but increasingly porous, as official actors adopt informal communication practices and independent actors sometimes cooperate with institutional structures.

Despite these limitations, the integrated interpretation provides a clear answer to the central research problem. The future of media diplomacy is likely to be networked, multi-actor, technologically mediated, and centered on competition over narrative and perception. Formal actors will remain essential, but their effectiveness will

increasingly depend on their ability to combine institutional legitimacy with communicative agility. Informal actors will continue to gain opportunities to shape international political meaning, but their influence will remain variable and context-dependent. Strategic success will therefore depend less on monopolizing information than on understanding networks, cultivating trust, maintaining credible narratives, responding rapidly, and preparing for emerging forms of communication.

Ultimately, the decisive transformation in media diplomacy concerns the structure of power itself. Communicative power is increasingly generated through relationships among institutions, technologies, narratives, and publics. The actors most capable of navigating this environment will be those that understand that authority and influence are no longer synonymous. Institutional legitimacy remains indispensable, but it must operate alongside credibility, responsiveness, network intelligence, and narrative competence. Media diplomacy in the coming years will therefore be shaped not by the disappearance of formal diplomacy or the unrestricted ascendancy of informal actors, but by the continuing renegotiation of their relationship within an increasingly complex communication ecosystem. The strategic task is to build a form of media diplomacy capable of functioning within that complexity: institutionally credible, socially connected, technologically adaptive, narratively coherent, and sufficiently future-oriented to respond not only to the crises of the present but also to the uncertainties of the communication environments still emerging.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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